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A Minor Art

Becoming-Animal of Marcus Coates

Past chapters have traced a path from the satyr to animal worlds and the pidgin language that develops when these worlds mark and re/mark upon each other. Having gone thus far in meeting the animals and their worlds, it would seem folly to go further. Of course, it is exactly this folly against reason, as laid out in the opening chapters, which now legitimates an inquiry into becoming-animal. The human-animal hybrid of the satyr explored in chapter 2 seems to necessitate a becoming. The potency of becoming-animal is evident in chapter 4, where Diogenes—the Dog—and his performative philosophy counters Plato’s dialectics by a thinking with the living flesh. Thought emanating from the Dog troubles the civil relationship represented by Plato’s Academy—it invokes an unsightly animality within the human. Diogenes risks becoming *bête*, bestial and dumb, the village idiot; however, it is a knowing idiocy that will dupe common sense and lead thought elsewhere.

A “knowing idiocy” is the topic of this chapter; it will bring us to “becoming-animal” as expressed in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari. Such becoming leads through issues of civility and the common sense that binds community. The artwork of Marcus Coates juxtaposes civility and animality in a way that elucidates and furthers the concept of becoming. It is now rather commonplace to describe his work in relation to the terms of Deleuze and Guattari,¹ though rarely do such descriptions provide an extensive

look at “becoming,” and few notice how Coates has extended the terms in ways unforeseen by philosophy. Of particular interest are his revival of a Scottish and Scandinavian folktale of seals becoming human, his various shaman ritual works of descent into “the lower world” of animal spirits to answer human dilemmas, and *Dawn Chorus* (2007), in which various humans as “local birds” of a community make bird noises.

IDIOCY AND THE ABYSS

Derrida, in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” explains what it means to follow the animal. As one might expect in this philosopher, the term *to follow* has several valences: he is in pursuit of, or following, how animals affect philosophy; further still, he is interested in and so follows the animality of the human—“the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself.”² He is also after—pursuing and belated to—“the ends of man”: the humanist subject has already fallen from its heights under the pressing relationship to our animal nature, by which “[c]rossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal.”³ Fundamental to Derrida’s essay on animals is the concept of “crossing borders” between animals and humans, and between the humanist notion of the subject (agent) and the loss of such a metaphysical position.

The fissure or abyss between us and the animal figures is central to Derrida. He insists that such a border between us and other animals, and even our own animality, is a common proposition that itself need not be explored:

For there is no interest to be found in a discussion of a supposed discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss between those who call themselves men and what so-called men, those who name themselves men, call the animal. Everybody agrees on this, discussion is closed in advance, one would have to be more asinine than any beast [*plus bête que les bêtes*] to think otherwise. . . . The discussion is worth undertaking once it is a matter of determining the number, form, sense, or structure, the foliated consistency of this abyssal limit, these edges, this plural and repeatedly folded frontier. The discussion becomes interesting

once, instead of asking whether or not there is a discontinuous limit, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line, once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible.⁴

Initially, I would like to focus on the spoken assumption that “[e]verybody agrees on this, discussion is closed in advance, one would have to be more asinine than any beast to think otherwise.” The sentence brings out some key terms. There is a tautology to this argument that says that everyone agrees there is an abyss except for those who disagree, but they do not counts because they are “more asinine than any beast.” Derrida uses “everybody” as a figure for common sense. Anyone who fits within this culture and its unarticulated values held in common is sufficiently sensible to know there is a difference between humans and animals. We might say that “common sense” throws itself—that is to say, it projects itself as its own ground by which it then makes claims that everyone knows and so remain unquestioned.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze explains how common sense throws itself: “conceptual philosophical thought has as its implicit presupposition a pre-philosophical and natural Image of thought, borrowed from the pure element of common sense. According to this image, thought has an affinity with the true; it formally possesses the true and materially wants the true.”⁵ Derrida notes that the discussion is “closed in advance”; in other words, there is a hermeneutic circle surrounding the question of the animal. One either possesses common sense and so is in the circle, or is without sense, is “more asinine than any beast” and so outside the circle of thought about the animal. What is closed to the bestial and asinine humans is any “discussion” of animal nature. This discussion is closed because anyone speaking without common sense would be speaking nonsense—one would have to be an idiot to think otherwise, to think differently. It is the role of such a village idiot to help those who have common sense measure their sensibility against the yardstick of his idiocy: “we” are not like him; therefore, we are sensible.

The idiot's stubbornness and wrong-headedness recalls Diogenes, who refuses to dialogue with Plato in the Academy because the master of dialectics will have a home field advantage against the Dog as an outsider and one who refutes common sense as a ground that grounds itself.⁶ In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker calls such idiocy the "creativity of nonexpert thinking." The expert knows and follows the rules for correct thinking and production; because the nonexpert does not know the rules he or she is breaking, such an out-of-sorts person can create something new and different. Baker summarizes the power of the outsider by quoting Derrida on invention: "An invention always presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts a disorder into the peaceful order of things, it disregards the proprieties."⁷ Baker goes so far as to claim that such a nonexpert can blur the expert lines between "human completeness" and the unraveling or "opening up" of the human, the "self."⁸ In breaking common sense and the sensibility that holds us as a community in common, one already is an idiot—*bête*, a beast.

To follow the possibility of creativity by way of idiocy incurs risks. There is the possibility that such nonsense is just that—inarticulate and meaningless blather. It is always possible that such a collapse of distinction between inside the hermeneutic circle and outside, between meaning and nothingness, will produce an undifferentiated noise, a worthless heap. The gambit heightens the fragility of the artist, who becomes vulnerable to forces both within the social circle and outside in the wild. If the artist's work works, it shifts the fragility from the artist and the art to the unstable nature of the hermeneutic circle and its investment in a language of common sense and reason.

MINOR ART

As seen in the last two chapters on animal worlding, the difficulty set upon by artists has been that humans and animals share the same earth but occupy different worlds. This difference—what Derrida calls an abyssal fracturing between human and animals—serves as the site of productivity for the artwork of Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, as well as for Olly and

Suzi. As examined in the last chapter, the friction between the human and animal worlds, and the abyss between them, serves as a contact zone or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”⁹ Mary Louise Pratt uses the term “contact zone” to describe “improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently.”¹⁰ The concept of “becoming-animal” extends how an improvised language and pidgin language might develop in the contact zone between humans and animals.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari can provide a way of thinking about pidgin language. Their book on Kafka introduces the concept “minor literature” in ways that will be useful for thinking about a contact zone. They view Kafka as a writer who “marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague.” He must negotiate the zone between the Austrian, German-speaking majority and his Jewish community. Kafka has found a way to turn “their literature into something impossible—the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise.”¹¹ As a Jew in Prague, Kafka is out of sorts; he does not quite fit into the German-speaking Austrian world. This is his “impasse that bars access”; it is the bar of common sense, civil sensibility, that prevents Kafka from entering into the hermeneutic circle of good citizenship and sensible writing. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka takes this weakness and from it, forges a “minor literature” to work against the linguistic and social bar that makes his writing impossible.

One of the features of this minor literature is the move from metaphor to metamorphosis. Later, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari will prominently characterize this shift as “becoming.” The good metaphor and obedient literary image works because of a social agreement based on selection, which signals the proper relationship between vehicle and tenor. The well-regulated metaphor manages elements to be included and those to be discarded in the relationship between vehicle and tenor. Thus, for example, we understand the phrase “words cut like razors” because common sense

selects the “sharpness” of words and razors as a trait shared between the two terms, the tenor and the vehicle. Good sense—the sensibility of selection—prevents us from suggesting that if words are like razors, one could shave with words. Literature, the “good” literature that uses metaphor properly, is the luxury of an established class and political group. Undermining metaphor becomes the revolutionary gesture of minor literature because it seeks to overturn implicit social values.

Pidgin languages botch or misplace the proper relations of metaphor between vehicle and tenure. By doing so, “we are no longer in the situation of an ordinary, rich language where the word dog, for example, would directly designate an animal and would apply metaphorically to other things (so that one could say ‘like a dog’).”¹² The result is the death of

all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation. Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape.¹³

Sound or words—or even, one might add, gestures and bodies—lead us away from established social configurations, away from metaphors that we have forgotten are metaphors and are now inscribed as social truths. We are led instead to meanings and marks of signification whose selection is based on the hybridity of two worlds being negotiated tentatively and temporally. Whereas metaphor puffs up meaning, making it redolent with multiple values, a minor literature flattens meaning; it is the site of the surface of one world meeting another, and is immanent to a particular place and time within a particular set of quasi-social exchanges. Most powerfully, “[l]anguage stops being representational in order to now move toward its extremities or its limits.”¹⁴

Deleuze and Guattari provide an example that is useful for the purpose of “becoming-animal”:

It is no longer a question of resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man; it is even less a question of a simple wordplay. There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversibility. Instead, it is now a question of a becoming that includes the maximum of differences as a difference of intensity, the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word. The animal does not speak “like” a man but pulls from the language tonalities lacking in signification; the words themselves are not “like” the animals but in their own way climb about, bark and roam around, being properly linguistic dogs, insects, or mice.¹⁵

Man and *animal* are linguistic subjects only within a properly established language. Once a “minor literature” begins dismantling the common-sense ground on which meaning is established, *man* and *animal* become fragile signifiers that may run astray or “deterritorialize.” They become available for “asignifying intensive utilization of language.”¹⁶

Animals challenge language and representation that too often purports to be disembodied thought. To think alongside animals means to distribute the body of thinking, creating a distribution of states or plural centers for valuing, selecting, and marking/making a world. Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, works against the power of representation, the power of major literature, and, one might add, established aesthetics:

Representation has only a single centre, a unique and receding perspective and in consequence a false depth. It mediates everything, but mobilizes and moves nothing. Movement, for its part, implies a plurality of centres, a superposition of perspectives, a tangle of points of view, a coexistence of moments which essentially distort representation.¹⁷

Here, representation is a false depth that coincides with the false depth of human interiority, both of which serve as a retreat from contact so as to stage a coup. In other words, representation and interiority attempt to assimilate

difference, and to value and select from the Outside or the Other on the basis of their own criteria. Representation tries to *eat* the Other, as Hegel or Hirst might say. To make thought move and to do real work at the horizon of the unthought, representation should, following Deleuze, create a friction, reciprocity, and exchange between the human symbolic system of representing and the physical world shared with other creatures—the marks and re/marks of various *Umwelts*. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari chart out how metamorphosis flattens language, and consequently how words can be retooled to disassemble social valuation and hierarchy.

If it is not already obvious, it is worth mentioning that while Deleuze and Guattari focus on literature and words, their concept of a minor literature can be used equally well in terms of art—with its established major art, its metaphors, its hierarchies of signification, and its privileging of the singular artist and his expression of the interior humanist subject. If, unlike literature, art has abandoned representation, it does not abort a mission for human expressiveness and the value of well-articulated ideas. Becoming *bête*, becoming the idiot and animal, creates a site or zone outside of major art and its grounding.

Much of Coates's artwork involves community. More specifically, he examines small or marginal communities through disrupting social conventions with animal worlds. While the role of community is clearly evident in his shaman rituals, in light of the role of animals and becoming, it is worth first turning to his earlier work, *Finfolk* (2003). In this video, Coates emerges from a sea bank dressed in athletic wear; he dances, gesticulates wildly, and spouts an inarticulate stream of words that sound something like a hybrid of Scottish, a Scandinavian language, and English cursing (Figure 20). When he spots a human family strolling along the quay, he zips up his coat and descends back into the water. Moments later, the family spots a seal bobbing in the ocean.

Coates is revising folklore about amphibious creatures who change form and interact with humans. According to Scottish folklore, the finfolk are mysterious shape-shifters who travel from their underwater world onto land in order to cause havoc. They are said to abduct humans and force them into servitude; they take young women and make them brides in their underwater



FIGURE 20 Marcus Coates, *Finfolk*, 2003. Video. Photograph by Mark Pinder. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

world. The myth of finfolk is related to that of the selkie, a creature found in Icelandic, Irish, and Scottish mythology. The Scottish word *sealgh*, or *selch* or *selk(ie)*, means “seal.” These creatures take on human form by shedding their seal, or selkie, skins, and conversely become selkie by resuiting into their skins. Many selkie stories are romantic tales of a lover knowingly or unknowingly marrying a selkie. In “The Secret of Roan Inish,” a farmer captures a selkie for a wife and locks away her sealskin in order to keep her in servitude and prevent her from returning to the sea. “The Grey Selkie of Suleskerry” is one of many ballads collected by Francis James Child and printed in his Victorian collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Coates’s athletic suit is a wry stand-in for the seal skin. Unlike in the legends, Coates as a finfolk is rather awkward on land: some moments he seems uncomfortably out of place, while at others he dances haphazardly on the shoreline. He is neither threatening like the finfolk nor seductive like the selkies.

Coates looks like an idiot; his words as a finfolk do not make sense: “Frik frak fuk fuk fo,” and on he goes; the story line of the piece does not match the myths. In short, what is he doing out there, out on the quay, on the shoreline where the human-made walkway meets the beating of nature’s waves? It is precisely this nonsense that is the fulcrum by which Coates leverages and jostles the human and animal worlds—a leveraging not through verticality of reason, but rather by immanence and mixture between *Umwelts*.

Recall Deleuze and Guattari on metamorphosis:

It is no longer a question of resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man. . . . The animal does not speak “like” a man but pulls from the language tonalities lacking in signification; the words themselves are not “like” the animals but in their own way climb about, bark and roam around, being properly linguistic dogs, insects, or mice.¹⁸

Coates puts out a very poor imitation of a seal designed to deflate metaphor and analogical comparisons. The work flattens meaning by baffling the viewer’s ability to make sense of how the piece fits within analogy and within

Scottish folklore. And yet the title insists that indeed this is *Finfolk*. The insistence of the title becomes its own ground and jabs at the hermeneutic circle, which grounds itself while erasing its tracks. If Coates looks foolish, if his yammering tells us nothing, and if the work itself remains inscrutable, it is all to the purpose of creating an “assignifying intensive utilization of language.”¹⁹ His words do not signify “like” the animals, but do roam and bark and climb. Their value is in the intensity of the performance. The camera focuses on just his mouth frothing with spit, spitting out nonsense syllables, showing his not-so-vicious teeth and tongue (Figure 21). The sounds become “intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of



FIGURE 21 Marcus Coates, *Finfolk*, 2003. Still from video. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

escape.”²⁰ By the end of the work, the sounds and wild antics lead back to the sea and its dark veil from which Coates emerged. The whole of the video work is but a glimpse at the unintelligibility of the Other and a wonder at its wandering.

Throughout *Finfolk* the idiocy makes us laugh, but in this laughter we are caught: we stand within the hermeneutic circle that gets the joke, and outside the circle through a sympathy with the wayfaring seal-man who seems decidedly outside the social and hermeneutic circle. The sympathy is necessary to get the joke but is abandoned to be able to stand within the circle by which we laugh. The audience is on a quay—a borderline between the unintelligible waves of nature and the manmade banks hoisted against erosion of the landscape. The laughter becomes a moment of deterritorialization (an abandonment of being inside or outside the social terrain) that works against reason and echoes the frothing, spitting mouth, and asignifying language of Coates the seal-man. Refusal to laugh acquiesces to the tyranny of reason; inability to laugh signals our own idiocy at not getting it, not being in the strange and stretched circle that contemplates human and animal worlding simultaneously. A laughter from the belly trumps the consumption of the world by reason.

Yes, “[e]verybody agrees on this [abyss between humans and animals], discussion is closed in advance, one would have to be more asinine than any beast to think otherwise.”²¹ Yet the minority who are not counted within the social circle of “everyone” remain sufficiently *bête* to “think otherwise.” Yes, it is a “thinking” to “think otherwise,” but a thinking sufficiently dull-witted to cleverly flatten the major literature, major art, and major language upon which “everybody” depends. The sublation, or *aufhebung*, of reason never counted on being outwitted by that which it rejects outright—idiocy, dullness, and the animal. The animal, Diogenes the Dog, and Coates will never beat reason at its own game, and therefore Coates has taken his toys and tools and moved elsewhere. In doing so, he makes language move, deterritorializes it. He repurposes the mouth, the tongue, the athletic suit, even his glasses (so commonly a sign of nerdish knowledge).

Deleuze and Guattari conceive of minor literature as political. Because the minority cannot win at the majority's game, those not within the circle of "everyone" must go elsewhere. Unlike the liberal democracy that authorizes the power of the individual subject, a minor literature and minor art work by "[a] movement from the individuated animal to the pack or to a collective multiplicity. . . . There isn't a subject; *there is only a collective assemblage of enunciation.*"²² In global politics, Iceland, Ireland, and Scotland are not the major players, being important only insofar as they abandon any past that would link seafaring with sea creatures and humans with animals. Coates calls up this collective and selectively tucked-away past not as a nostalgic ballad, but as a site of intensity that can trouble the political majority by "thinking otherwise," by thinking with another minority, the animal.

ECOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE

It would be a bit of idiocy to think of Coates's work only under the placeholder of the *bête*. The artist makes use of quite a few character/concept positions. Complementary to the blunt surface of thought, a thinking without depth, this nonexpert also takes on the role of shaman in *Journey to the Lower World* (2004)—a role that coincides with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming and the role of the sorcerer.

Throughout their chapter "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . ." in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write a series of "memories" from different perspectives, including those of "a Naturalist" and "a Sorcerer." The two characters are played out against each other in order to illustrate their concept, "becoming." Throughout the chapter, the juxtaposition between these characters concerns issues of structure. The naturalist maintains a transcendent structure for sorting out the various flora and fauna he encounters: "Natural history can think only in terms of relationships (between A and B), not in terms of production (from A to x)."²³ Differences between the two items, A and B, are mediated by a standard held by the naturalist from a transcendent position outside of the system of divisions by which A and B are compared. In contrast, the sorcerer works against

the ideal type (of natural history) by using packs of animals and by promoting unnatural conjunctions and hybrids. We have seen a similar dynamic in chapters 1 and 2, where Francis Bacon's natural history in the first chapter contrasts with the hybridity of the satyr in the second.

The sorcerer displays a new mode of agency that differs from the objecthood of animals dissected by the naturalist:

There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. We reserve the name *haecceity* for it. A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected. When demonology expounds upon the diabolical art of local movements and transports of affect, it also notes the importance of rain, hail, pestilential air, or air polluted by noxious particles, favorable conditions for these transports. Tales must contain haecceities that are not simply emplacements, but concrete individuations that have a status of their own and direct the metamorphosis of things and subjects.²⁴

Haecceity is a Latin term for "thisness," which Deleuze and Guattari borrow from the medieval philosopher Dun Scotus as a way to express "nonpersonal individuations."²⁵ The sorcerer is one who is haunted by the "capacities to affect and be affected." With *haecceity*, the philosophers set up the thickness of an event with its complex relationships in time and space: "Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals, or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them. This should be read without a pause: the animal-stalks-at-five-o'clock."²⁶ A whole ecology resides in the moment of an event—crucially, not a foreseeable event, but one that arises through "demonic" or diabolical arts; that is to say, it is not an event within the common sense of the community, the consensus. It is an alternative sensibility that assembles these affects and allows something new

to appear, which is not quantifiable or comparable as a series of known or knowable elements “in terms of relationships (between A and B)”; instead, the event as truly something other than the predictable line of causes and affects produces something new that takes us away from the familiar, creating a line of flight “in terms of production (from A to *x*).”²⁷

Not unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s sorcerer, in *Journey to the Lower World*, Coates plays the role of the shaman. He dons a deerskin complete with head, gleaming eyes, and prominent antlers. When a Sheil Park building in Liverpool is set to be destroyed, he offers to talk with the animal spirits of the lower world on behalf of the residents. Coates is not looking to save the building—newer homes will be built for the residents; instead, he seeks a communal cohesion amid the turmoil by consulting the wisdom of the animal spirits of the lower world. He creates an event that helps the displaced citizens think outside of the known status of their fate and consider a larger economy of relationships between humans and the nonhuman world.

Wrapped in his shaman’s deerskin, Coates roams the streets and park near the housing complex and cleanses one of the building’s apartments as a sacred site by vacuuming it with a Hoover and spitting water from a Safeway bottle. He dances with jingling car keys tied to his shoes while a cassette tape of drums plays in the background. His antennae-like antlers knock against a lamp and almost get caught in a curtain. He stumbles in a trance state from spinning in circles (Plate 7). To the “sensible” “everyone,” to the Western Everyman, he looks like an idiot. Again he subsumes the role of the non-expert outsider, “the artist who insists on the fidelity of his amateurism”²⁸; again he is on the margins—in this case, between the world of humans and that of the animal spirits; again he performs unintelligible gestures that are meant as a pidgin language; again he is vulnerable, at risk.

On the night before the ritual, Coates ponders the risks:

Lots of things worried me, such as questions of ethics, appropriating rites from another culture, setting myself up as a medium, my lack of training. And would it work as an event: Were the residents [of the housing complex] going to turn

up? What would their reactions be? Some of them were elderly, they might be seriously scared. Would they be insulted, call me a charlatan, think I'm taking the piss? Even worse, would they think they were being duped? They might tell me to fuck off. What sort of questions were they going to ask me? How the hell would I explain the ritual. What if I can't get down to the Lower World, should I just make something up?²⁹

Coates bravely places himself in these fool-hearted positions; the audience feels this same tension. As in *Finfolk*, the audience is caught between the seriousness—the authenticity of the endeavor—and the sheer absurdity of a postmodern, new-age, weekend shaman.

Upon emerging from his journey, Coates tells the residents what happened. In his spirit walk, he descended in the elevator at the center of the building complex; it reached the ground floor and kept descending. The doors opened onto a cave complex where, one after another, he met various animal spirits. He carried with him the questions given by the residents: "Do we have a protector for this site? What is it?" One after another, the animals rebuff his approach, pointing him elsewhere. He calls out to them: the moorhen ("prrrrrrr"), a coot ("ouw ouw ouw ouw"), a stag ("oargghhh oargghhh oargghhh"), and a fallow deer hind ("á á á á á á á"), even a curlew ("wwwhhhhhaaa") and a rook ("jrr' jrr' jrr"). Despite the calls, none of them want to know the questions. Finally, he finds a sparrow hawk and calls to it: "kek kek kek kek kek." The bird shows him one of its wings, but oddly, its feathers are moving independently so that it cannot fly. The bird begins to shrink and becomes long like a snake or stick until it disappears. Coates as shaman surmises that "these feathers were you, and you should really get as close knit as you can. It was like they were saying[,] well: your protector is the group in a way, that is the thing that's going to look out for you."³⁰ During the trance and the animal callings, the expressions of the residents looking on vacillate among awe, surprise, and laughter. When the conversation turns to what Coates saw, the residents earnestly try to fit his vision into their understanding of the community and its future. It seems that the risk Coates took in this ritual has paid off.

Coates is able to assemble an environment by his disarming demeanor and the oddity of his new-age shamanism, yet also by the strikingly eerie and earnest otherworldliness. Coates's cameraman explains: "Marcus whirls and writhes oblivious to our world, shaking and screaming the noises of life. I am not ready for this; I feel shocked at the rapid transformation; the animal noises are guttural and real and don't belong in a block of flats in Liverpool."³¹ The performance suggests that there is another world parallel to ours though out of our reach—veiled, but very much alive with creatures. The shaman translates between these worlds and brings to our awareness the possibility of a future other than the one contained "in a block of flats in Liverpool." It is not that Coates looks to solve the residents' problems, but instead points to the future's future; that is, he points to a future that is impossible within the circumstances of the life we have assembled. Yet it is a future imaginable to the one who is able to assemble diverse elements into a *haecceity*.³² It is not simply intended to inspire hope in the residence nor serve as an opiate of the masses to help them forget their unfortunate circumstances; rather, it suggests that there is a world and a way of being that has yet to be co-opted by the current state of affairs. Its nature is that of an event—that which is absurdly different from our mundane lives and the oppression of common sense. Coates in his deerskin with antlers stands at attention on a street corner, walks through a park, waits for an elevator, infusing these everyday sites with an otherness and with an impossible future (Figure 22). His art invites us to join him in this line of flight "in terms of production (from A to x).³³ The opacity yet possibilities of this unknown x capture participants' imaginations and help them to think otherwise.

Becoming-animal is not about Coates taking on characteristics of any particular beast; becoming is not an exercise in mimesis: "These are not phantasies or subjective reveries: it is not a question of imitating a horse, 'playing horse,' identifying with one, or even experiencing feelings of sympathy or pity."³³ Becoming is the opening up of a general economy, a flow of powers and relations—what Deleuze and Guattari call "assemblages and affiliations." It is not that Coates ever becomes a particular animal, a moorhen, coot, stag,



FIGURE 22 Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004. Video. Photograph by Nick David. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

curlew, or sparrow hawk; rather, the environmental economy of relations is opened up so that he is able to pass through these states and attributes. “The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities,” such that Coates as the nonexpert is able to occupy various sites or thresholds and pass through them in an ongoing becoming.³⁴ The grunts, whines, and whimpers are moments of intensity—a circling of the sphere of various animals.

Deleuze and Guattari warn not to be trapped into a false naming and knowing about animals—the claim made by natural history: “We fall into a false alternative if we say you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes.”³⁵ Spinning away from the human and navigating various animal identities, the artist has more of a sense of the fragility of fixed terms than we do in our mundane world. *Journey to the Lower World* tugs at the worn threads of our restricted economy of relations with the world around us.

It is just such a restricted economy that Coates seems to knowingly manipulate. The most common question audiences ask him is whether or not he actually sees and talks with animal spirits or whether it is all just a show and veils of theatrics. Is his becoming-animal simply a sly wink-and-nod game in which he leverages cultural desires for communication to advance his own artistic ends? In doing so, the artist is well aware of the social economy in which he functions. Yet put under question, Coates never fully admits that the shaman ritual is only a show. By all appearances, something seems to be going on, and according to most of Coates’s conversations, there is at least a glimmer of a “journey” taking place. The undecidability could be blithely dismissed as inauthentic showmanship for the consumer, yet Coates is sincere in his ambivalence. That is to say, he wants to have it both ways and wants to keep his audience in the state of unknowing as long as possible.

Coates continues to don the deerskin and journey to the lower world in *Radio Shaman* (2006) and *Kamikuchi “The Mouth of God”* (2006). In *Radio Shaman*, Coates visits the town of Stavanger, Norway, and asks its citizens what problems he might help them solve through his shaman ritual. More than any other issue, residents were concerned about the recent influx of prostitutes from Nigeria and West Africa. Coates performs a shaman ritual at the city’s cathedral, then another at the political council offices, and finally on the streets frequented by the prostitutes. In these rituals, the vision of a seal becomes important. On a local radio program, he announces the results of his ritual. In going to the lower world, he saw a stranded baby seal wanting

to return to its parents in the water; it is too frightened, however, to allow Coates near enough to help it. This unsolved problem of the animal spirit echoes the problem for Stavanger's citizens, though it is not a simple analogy in which the seal equals citizens or the seal equals prostitutes. Instead, it is an alternate world where an animal suffering and estrangement calls to Coates, and through him, to the citizens of the town. In feeling the animal's pain and confusion, citizens can then emit and extend empathy within the social realm of the human world. The solution is not clear, but Coates has unleashed a pathway of affect that otherwise remained hidden.

In *Kamikuchi "The Mouth of God,"* Coates visits the Ikebukuro district of Tokyo and stages a shaman ritual as part of the Ikebukuro Arts Festival. After consulting with the local arts council and the government, he presents this question to the animal spirits: What should be done regarding illegal bicycle parking? For this ritual, Coates dons the postmodern wardrobe of contemporary Tokyo by merging both Japanese and American pop culture (Figure 23): he wears a white Marilyn Monroe dress, high heels, and blonde wig; a taxidermied rabbit protrudes from the wig; he sports large 1970s rock-star sunglasses; around his neck is a ruffled collar made of Japanese yen. The drumbeats of his shaman trance are mixed with trance house music. Behind him on a large screen is a video of his shaman dancing to house music, along with stills of the stuffed rabbit. The performance seems absolutely absurd, yet hauntingly authentic. In his shaman event, Coates assembles the environmental economy of cultural mash-up that is Tokyo. In his trance, he sees a thousand deer locking antlers as part of their social bonding. Coates tells his arts festival audience that bicycles should be allowed to be parked anywhere. This friction of illegal bicycles is part of the social negotiations that make the community stronger.

In his shaman rituals, as in *Finfolk* and his many other animal-becoming video performances, Coates is seeking out a problem as means of reshaping the common sense of social values. In other words, it is not through what is held in common and agreed on that makes the community strong; rather, the problems it poses to itself reveal and even help constitute the structure of the



FIGURE 23 Marcus Coates, *Kamikuchi "The Mouth of God,"* 2006. Video. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

community. Coates lets the community see itself obliquely through his vision quests with the animal world: he shows the community of Sheil Park their struggle for solidarity through the feathers of a sparrow hawk; he reveals the issues of inclusion for Stavanger's citizens by presenting them with the stranded baby seal; and he reveals the role of community within the problem of illegal bicycle parking. Coates is not looking for solutions that, like an on-off switch, can neatly solve the problems and assimilate the issues within communities, within their hermeneutic circle and their circle of intelligibility; he reveals instead how problems are fragments from an outside that function within culture to propel it elsewhere. Taking these fragments seriously, Coates provides a voice from an inaccessible or impossible space and time—

the space of the animal spirits, and the time of their speaking to and with humans. As shaman, Coates balances the heterogeneity of culture and animality through his performance of becomings.

ECOLOGIES OF THE SURFACE

Coates provides heterogeneous ecologies and otherworldly possibilities that seem impossible within our world, yet we still make this distinction between these other worlds and our own. Even if he has tried to plant fragments of the Other in our world, there is a hermeneutic circle to contend with. Perhaps it might be possible to think of this problem differently: What if the bubble of the human world and the bubble of the animal worlds (what Uexküll calls a “bubble [that] represents each animal’s environment”) were flattened and took place on the same plane?³⁶ While previous chapters discussed the surfaces of intersection between the human and the animal, in Coates’s *Dawn Chorus*, the spatial thinking is changed: instead of heterogeneous worlds, Coates imagines a single plane in which human and animal traits spread out across vast distances and occasionally intersect.

Dawn Chorus is a video installation with fourteen large screens in a gallery. Each screen shows a person going about mundane tasks while twitching and bobbing and singing like a bird in the wilds (Figure 24). The project began with Coates observing birds in a field in England’s Northumberland countryside. With the assistance of wildlife sound recordist Geoff Sample, Coates set up microphones in trees, bushes, and brush frequented by various birds. As though an almost daily ritual, the birds seemed to return to the same spots to sing. With fourteen microphones recording from three to nine in the morning for six days, they logged some 576 hours of birdsongs, including songs of robins, whitethroats, wrens, blackbirds, song thrushes, yellowhammers, and greenfinches.

Using audio equipment, Coates slowed down the songs so that they easily could be sung or whined or groaned by humans in their natural habitats: the bath, the kitchen, in a taxi, at work, and so on. He recruited members of amateur choirs in Bristol to sing these songs and filmed the results. He then sped



FIGURE 24 Marcus Coates, *Dawn Chorus*, 2007. Installation at Baltic Gallery. Photograph by Colin Davison. Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London.

up this film to match that of the birds' singing in nature. It is then that the videos come to life, as if birds and humans had sloughed off hierarchies and different worlds to cross attributes: "Blue Tit is a woman lying in bed, fluttering her eyes and whistling through a puckered mouth. Linnet is an osteopath, nodding and blinking furiously and puffing up his chest in his consulting room."³⁷ Piers Partridge is the blackbird filmed working in his garden:

The blackbird had one or two favorite riffs, so I'd think "OK, here he goes." I imagined myself as a blackbird on a spring morning, very early in a high place, having that freedom not to think but just to let the sound come out. With that came some interesting movements—I was cocking my head to look around. I felt really spaced out. When it finished I was miles away.³⁸

Mr. Partridge, with his fortuitous name, becomes part of a general economy; not unlike Coates's shaman in a trance, the amateur singer is transported in time and space.

In approaching animals and "becoming-animal," Coates occasionally refers to a common ancestry we have with other beasts, a common remote past that he is tapping into. He could as easily have referred to a common phenomenology, a shared sense of breathing, moving, and sensing. There are dangers in such talk: it can overlook massive differences between humans and animals, which result in not giving animals their due in being different from us; it can evoke a psychological unconscious, which then moves the conversation from surfaces and interactions to the privileged interiority of the human subject as *the* animal with greatest depth of conscious and unconscious; it can lead from Sigmund Freud through Jacques Lacan to the privileging of language. Rather than following this tack, my gambit is that the commonality is a product of leveling heterogeneous worlds onto a plane of immanence. This does not mean creating a homogeneous and singular world for humans and animals; instead, it scatters properties held properly under the name and world of "human" and "animal." As Steve Baker explains in one of his series of essays on art and becoming-animal, "such performances appear to necessitate the sloughing of preconceptions and of identities."³⁹ Amid this dispersal of properties, squawking, grunting, and bobbing occasionally align with gardening, driving a taxi, or taking a bath (Plate 8). By leveling worlds, this artist as sorcerer has revealed a becoming within the "local birds" of Northumberland. While previous works allowed Coates to become animal and bring the otherworldly to culture, here the community itself unravels into a becoming: the commonsense and daily routine is leveled so as to be reconfigured within the animal world.

If we could think without an inside and outside, if we could be blunt and idiot enough to think without an abyss between humans and animals, we would arrive at another sort of site and productivity—another sort of thinking. Rather than eating the Other through sublation, rather than taking the animal within oneself and digesting its more tasty bits, this leveling of worlds

suggests a continual transfer of attributes. Sometimes these transfers do real work by their creative jostling of terms and forms: Mr. Partridge becomes spaced out and sails miles away; Coates bears witness to the spirit of a baby seal, which helps the people of Stavanger think “fragility” rather than “domination.” At other times, this transfer of properties fails as a one-off piece, with no grip or friction with which to work. Such are the risks in a nonstratified mix of worlds. In loosing the tethers of what it means to be human, we find new avenues and lines of flight by which to traverse the un-thought of thought.

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